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ABSTRACT

This study examined the feelings of confidence in parenting among 13 women enrolled in a parent education program in rural Mississippi which emphasized academic skills and personal growth. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant correlation between parents' feelings of self-differentiation and confidence as parents. Based on several measures of parental functioning and confidence, the study found a high level of intimacy between the women and their parents. It also found that the more the woman felt intimidated by her parents, the less approachable she was and the less she allowed her children to express their emotions. In addition, the more intergenerational intimidation she felt from her family of origin, the less able she was to help her child develop a healthy self-image and sense of self-reliance. (MDM)

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Fostering Parental Autonomy: An Aid to Effective Parenting

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A research paper presented at the annual meeting of
The Southern Early Childhood Association

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Parents experience many difficulties that affect their parenting abilities. Changes such as their own and their children's developmental growth, economic ups and downs, family of origin issues and expectations, as well as social and institutional policies each have an impact on parenting.

The purpose of this presentation is to report on an exploratory research project that we did with mothers involved in a Displaced Homemakers' Program. The purpose of our research is to determine if there is a correlation between parents' feelings of self-differentiation and confidence as parents.

SELF DIFFERENTIATION:

The term "self differentiation" defies simple explanation or definition. It does not describe autonomy or self-esteem or self-actualization. Self-differentiation describes a direction one chooses for their life rather than a state of being or even a series of events (Friedman, 1991).

It refers to taking a stand in an intense emotional system, to saying 'I will do...' when others are demanding 'we will do...', to being non-anxious when all around you others are anxious (Friedman, 1991, p. 141.)

In spite of the emphasis upon one's capacity to choose, decide, and to act for ones self, the self differentiating person does not cut-off from family-of-origin or from significant others.

Indeed, the true mark of the self differentiating person is one who can, and does, retain both self and relationships. According to Bowen, the extreme opposite of self differentiation is "fusion", a situation where personal boundaries are blurred and it is difficult to observe separation of one person from others within the family system.

Another way to look at self-differentiation is to relate it to a process of ". . . taking responsibility for one's life, including making decisions about goals, values, and life styles amidst family of origin pressure to conform to family rules." (Stanberry & Stanberry, 1992). Self differentiation suggests a degree of personal authority within one's family system (Bray, Harvey & Williamson, 1987; Williamson, 1981); a feeling of "I am in charge of my life and I am still connected to you, my family".

PARENTAL COMPETENCE:

Since systemic thinking takes seriously the notion of circular causality, it suggests a parallelism between the way a parent feels about him or herself and the way he or she parents. That is, if I feel good about myself and my capabilities as a person, I will feel good about my capabilities as a parent. Not much research work has been accomplished in this general field of study.

For the purposes of this study, parental competence is defined as the parents' perceived confidence in being able to meet their childrens' emotional and social developmental needs (Siegel, Mesango & Christ, 1990a).

Demographics

Setting

Our subjects came from a Displaced Homemakers Group in rural southern Mississippi which focused on academic skills and personal growth. Academic testing and the indicated follow-up work, support group interactions, guest speakers, and workshops contribute to the program.

Of the 13 females who took the two instruments, 8 were African-American, one was Hispanic, one was American Indian, and 4 were Caucasian.

They ranged in age from 17 to 48 with a mean age of 34.5. A stem and leaf plot shows the ages more graphically.

Insert Table 1 about here

The marital status of the mothers indicated three were married. They had been married for an average of 16.4 years with a range of 7 to 29 years.

Ten were separated, or divorced or had never married and had been single parents for an average of 7.7 years with a range of 1 to 15 years.

The number of household members ranged from 2 to 11 with 6 households having three members.

For our sample group of mothers, the ages of children ranged from 3 to 22 years. Two mothers had one child, seven had 2 children, three had 3 children and one had 4 children.

Two mothers had grandchildren living in the home who were preschool age and one mother had a grandchild who was in elementary school.

One mother had her own mother living in the home. One mother had her daughter and son-in-law living in the home. One mother had another couple and their two children living in her home.

The study was a post-test only correlational design. We were interested in determining if the participating parents' personal authority in the family system would be correlated with their confidence in parenting. The results of the research hypothesis was based on scores obtained on the Global Parenting Confidence

Measure and the Personal Authority in the Family System-Questionnaire.

The Global Parenting Confidence Measure was designed by Dr. Karolynn Siegel and her staff in the Social Work Research Department of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City. The instrument is designed to "assess parents' confidence in their abilities to meet their children's emotional and social developmental needs" (Siegel, Raveis, Bettes, Mesango, Christ, & Weinstein, 1990, p. 572).

Parental functioning, as defined by the test authors, means the parents' abilities to perform parenting activities and establish and sustain the parent-child relationship. Parental functioning in the areas of comfort/openness, sensitivity/reassurance, promoting self-esteem/independence, support/trust, setting standards/discipline, and global confidence were measured.

The Personal Authority in the Family System-Questionnaire was designed by Drs. James Bray, Donald Williamson, and Paul Malone. The self-report instrument is based on intergenerational family theory and is designed to "assess important relationships in the three generational family system" (Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1984, p. 1) as perceived by an individual family member.

We must be extremely cautious in analyzing the data. This was an exploratory study. Further data collection will occur from a sample of about 200 persons from varying parenting/personal growth groups in Mississippi.

The data from the exploratory study presented a picture of the mothers as being intimate and satisfied with their parents and, paradoxically, fused, triangled, and intimidated by them. I would like to explain fused, triangulated, and intimidated so you can more clearly see what is occurring.

We could make a continuum of healthy behavior with self-differentiation at the far right end and fusion or enmeshment at the left.

Self-differentiated people are independent; they think before they speak; they **act** on **thoughts** not **react to feelings**. They are not ruled by emotions. The result is they are more flexible and adaptable and they cope better under stress. Bowen (1978) argues that self-differentiated people are less likely to develop

symptoms in the face of stress and they will recover from any symptoms more quickly than undifferentiated persons (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Fusion indicates how emotionally stuck people are. Fused or undifferentiated persons do not have a clear sense of who they are; they operate from a more emotionally reactive basis and are more likely to develop symptoms in the face of stress. Families who are fused think, feel, speak, and function for each other. The level of fusion reflects the degree of unresolved emotional attachment to the parental family (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Some people cut-off from the family of origin as a way of dealing with fusion. They may limit their visits to their parents' home, or emotionally distance themselves by withdrawing into books, themselves, fantasy or become preoccupied with health concerns. People who cut-off tend to over-invest in other relationships which puts more stress on them to succeed in present relationships (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Triangulation describes the phenomena of a three person coalition which is formed in order to alleviate the stress of unresolved issues between two of the parties involved. In families, intergenerational triangulation may occur, for example, when the coalition forms between a grandparent, adult child and grandchild.

Intergenerational intimidation means being reluctant to do what you think is right and best in favor of what your parents think is right and best.

So, back to our results. The data showed a high level of intimacy between mothers and their parents. We did not expect to see this. Several factors may be influencing this result. First, the sample size is small and the results may be skewed.

Insert Table 2 about here

Second, we believe mothers, fathers, all people, inherently want to be close to their parents. It is related to Bowlby's attachment theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We all need to feel loved and that we belong; families are typically the place this occurs.

Third, 10 of the mothers are either never married, separated or divorced and may need a close adult relationship. Their parents may be the only ones available.

Fourth, 8 of the mothers are between 35 and 48 years old so

their mothers may be getting to the age that they are more vulnerable and needy. As parents age, we become more aware of their eventual death. As a result, the parents may exercise more control over us. In our society a teenager may get angry and yell at her mother and others say "She's just a normal teenager." But to yell and scream at an aged mother is not socially acceptable. Persons with aging parents may say to themselves "she is old, I do not want to upset her".

Some of the questions that contributed to the Intergenerational Intimacy scale are "I get together with my parents from time to time for conversation and recreation" and "I openly show tenderness toward my parents". It seems to us that the mothers could respond in the affirmative to these questions and still be intimidated, fused and triangulated with their parents.

So, even though the mean scale score for intergenerational intimacy indicated a high level of intimacy, the scale score means for intergenerational fusion, triangulation, and intimidation, and for personal authority indicated below average, probably dysfunctional, family relationships.

Insert Table 3 about here

The Global Parenting Confidence Measure rendered interesting results, also. This is a fairly new instrument and no national norms are available. However, preliminary analysis indicates the instrument is reliable (Frances Mesango, personal communication, March 9, 1993). The mean scale scores do indicate that while parents feel fairly competent in several areas, the global score is the lowest of all the scale scores.

Insert Table 4 about here

When we looked at the correlation between the GPCM and PAFS, we found moderate negative correlations between comfort/openness and intergenerational intimidation as well as between promoting self-esteem/independence and intergenerational intimidation. This indicates that the more the parent feels intimidated by her own parent, the less approachable she is and the less she allows her children to express their emotions.

Insert Table 5 about here

In addition, the more intergenerational intimidation she feels from her family of origin, the less able she is to help her child develop a healthy self-image and sense of self-reliance.

We also found, as we expected, a moderate correlation between parents' abilities to promote their children's self-esteem/ independence and intergenerational individuation. However, the surveyed families' mean scale score for fusion/individuation indicated they were closer to the fusion end of the continuum than the self-differentiation end. The indication is, then, that as they continue to differentiate, they will promote their children's self-esteems.

Conclusions

Again, we must be very careful in making any conclusions from this exploratory study. We used the Pearson Product Moment Correlation for analysis and it is sensitive to sample size. We did reach moderate to strong correlations with several of the factors which, if the trend continues in those directions, will indicate that parenting programs that help parents to gain control of their lives will, help them to feel more competent as parents. As they feel more competent in their parental role, their interaction with children will enrich family life.

A correlation between individuation and parenting confidence may suggest a rationale for offering parent education programs which are outside the traditional, needs/skill based programming realm. In addition, such correlations could suggest goals for marital and family therapists as they work with families in which parenting issues are a major part of the family's dysfunction.

For family professionals, then, an indication that self-differentiation and parenting confidence are correlated could result in helping parents develop more effective parenting styles that break generation to generation symptomatic cycles. This in turn may lead to strengthening children, families, and communities.

Table 1

Age

1	7
2	5 9
3	0 0 5 5 5
4	1 6 6 7 8

Table 2

Personal Authority in the Family System

Scale	Mean	SD	Range
Spousal Intimacy	38.8	13.7	12-55
Nuclear Family Triangulation	35.0	7.0	21-49
Spousal Fusion/Individuation	62.3	6.8	52-74
Intergenerational Intimacy	98.2	12.3	78-118
Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation	26.8	5.3	17-34
Intergenerational Triangulation	34.6	5.3	22-51
Intergenerational intimidation	85.4	26.3	37-128
Personal Authority	38.2	4.6	33-47

Table 3

Personal Authority in the Family System

Scale	Mean	SD	Range
Intergenerational Intimacy*	98.2	12.3	78-118
Intergenerational Fusion/Individuation**	26.8	5.3	17-34
Intergenerational Triangulation**	34.6	5.3	22-51
Intergenerational Intimidation**	85.4	26.3	37-128
Personal Authority**	38.2	4.6	33-47

Note. N = 13.
*= mean indicates high level of factor being measured
**= mean indicates below average, probably dysfunctional, family relationships

Table 4

Global Parenting Confidence Measure

Scale	Mean	SD	Range
Comfort/Openness	78.75	12.14	54.6 - 99.9
Sensitivity/re-assurance	69.09	16.65	41.6 - 98.0
Self-esteem/In-dependence	77.48	19.71	41.6 - 99.9
Support/Trust	80.97	10.85	63.2 - 99.9
Setting Standards/ Discipline	70.49	14.99	50.7 - 99.9
Global Score	62.02	19.09	23.1 - 98.0

Note. N = 13.

Table 5

Pearson Product Moment Correlations for Global Parenting Confidence Measure and Personal Authority in the Family System

GPCM	PAFS-Q	Correlations
Comfort Openness	Intergenerational Intimidation	-.4963 (13, p = .042)
Promoting Self-esteem	Intergenerational Intimidation	-.4585 (13, p = .058)
Promoting Self-esteem	Intergenerational Individuation	.5877 (13, p = .017)

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